

Study Finds Racially Diverse Suburban Communities Growing Faster than White Suburbs but Resegregation Threatens Prosperity and Stability

JULY 20, 2012—Racially diverse suburbs are growing faster than white suburbs, but resegregation threatens their prosperity and stability, according to a study entitled, "America's Racially Diverse Suburbs: Opportunities and Challenges," released this week by the Institute on Metropolitan Opportunity at the University of Minnesota Law School.

Long perceived as predominantly prosperous white enclaves, suburbs are now at the cutting edge of racial, ethnic and political change in America. The study finds the number of racially diverse suburbs, municipalities ranging from 20-60 percent non-white, increased from 1,006 to 1,376 between 2000 and 2010 in the 50 largest U.S. metropolitan areas (a 37 percent increase). Fully 44 percent of suburban residents in these areas now live in racially diverse communities, up from 38 percent in 2000. Moreover, racially diverse suburbs are growing faster than white suburbs, and the number of diverse neighborhoods in suburbs is now more than twice the number found in central cities.

"Diverse suburbs represent some of the nation's greatest hopes and its gravest challenges," says study co-author Myron Orfield, director of the Institute on Metropolitan Opportunity. "The rapidly growing diversity of suburban communities suggests a degree of declining racial bias and at least the partial success of fair housing laws. But the fragile demographic stability in these newly diverse suburbs presents serious challenges for local, state and federal governments."

The study finds that racially diverse suburban communities have many attractive features, including relatively strong tax bases, low poverty rates, and strong local economies. They also are more walkable and energy efficient. According to Orfield, these findings are consistent with other research showing that diverse communities have higher graduation rates for minority students, better access to college and middle-income jobs, better race relations, greater civic engagement by all, and enhanced ability to cope with America's increasingly diverse workplaces.

However, while representing great hope, these diverse suburbs face challenges, the most serious being resegregation. The study finds that many of these communities are in the midst of racial, social and economic transition, abetted by mortgage lending and insurance discrimination, subsidized housing placement, exclusionary zoning, and racial gerrymandering of school attendance boundaries.

The study proposes a number of public policy changes to help to stabilize diverse communities:

- Creation of local stable integration plans with fair housing ordinances, incentives for pro-integrative home loans, cooperative efforts with local school districts, and financial support of pro-integrative community-based organizations.
- Greater enforcement of existing civil rights laws including the Fair Housing Act, especially the sections related to racial steering, mortgage lending discrimination and location of publicly subsidized affordable housing.
- Adoption of regional strategies to limit exclusionary zoning and require affluent suburbs to accommodate their fair share of affordable housing.
- Adoption of metropolitan-scale strategies to promote more diverse schools.

"Resegregation is common but not inevitable," says Orfield. "Stable integration is possible but it does not happen by accident. It is the product of clear race-conscious strategies, hard work, and political collaboration among local governments. Racially diverse communities represent the best model for the nation's educational, economic and political success."

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The Institute on Metropolitan Opportunity at the University of Minnesota Law School investigates the ways that laws, policies and practices affect development patterns in U.S. metropolitan regions. Through top-level scholarship, mapping, and advocacy, it provides the resources policymakers, planning officials and community organizations need to address reform in taxation, land use, housing, metropolitan governance and education. More information is available at <http://www.law.umn.edu/metro.html>.